Czech pronunciation Výslovnost

The good news: Czech is read the way it's written. Each letter has one sound, nothing is silent, and the stress is always on the first syllable. Learn this page and you can read any Czech word aloud, even one you've never seen.

Sound hints on this sheet: CAPS is the stressed syllable; e or eh is e in bed; aa, ee, oo are long vowels; kh is ch in loch; zh is s in pleasure; rzh is ř; ny, dy, ty are soft n, d, t; y is the Czech j. Example: Děkuji, thank you, is DYEH-ku-yi.

a
u in cup, short
taky also

á
a in father, held
máma mum

b
b
bratr brother

c
ts in cats, always
co what

č
ch in church
čaj tea

d
d
dům house

ď
d + y, like d in dew
ďábel devil

e
e in bed
den day

é
the same e, held
mléko milk

ě
ye in yes (see page 2)
pět five

f
f
fotka photo

g
g in go, mostly in borrowed words
guma rubber, eraser

h
a breathy h with the voice on
hora mountain

ch
ch in loch: one letter, after h
chata cottage

i
i in bit (soft i)
pivo beer

í
ee in see
víno wine

j
y in yes, always
jo yeah

k
k, with no puff of air
kočka cat

l
a clear l, as in leaf
les forest

m
m
maso meat

n
n
noc night

ň
ny in canyon
kůň horse

o
o in hot
okno window

ó
the same o, held; rare
gól goal

p
p, with no puff of air
pes dog

r
a tapped or rolled r, always said
ryba fish

ř
a rolled r and ž at once (page 3)
řeka river

s
s in see, never z
sestra sister

š
sh in shoe
škola school

t
t, with no puff of air
táta dad

ť
t + y, like t in tune
ťukat to tap

u
u in put
ruka hand

ú
oo in food, at the start of a word
úterý Tuesday

ů
the same oo, inside a word
stůl table

v
v
voda water

y
the same as i (hard y)
my we

ý
the same as í
dobrý good

z
z in zoo
zima winter, cold

ž
s in pleasure
žena woman, wife

q w x
borrowed words only: kv, v, ks
taxi taxi

No puff: English p, t and k come with a little puff of air (hold a hand in front of your mouth and say top). Czech p, t, k have none, so they sound softer: pes, táta, kočka.

Little marks Háček a čárka

čárka, the little stroke
á é í ó ú ý
Same vowel, held about twice as long. It never changes the sound itself.

kroužek, the little ring
ů
Only on u. ů and ú sound exactly the same: a long oo, as in food.

háček, the little hook (ˇ)
č š ž ř ď ť ň ě
A new sound: c is ts, č is ch. On d and t it looks like a comma: ď, ť, but Ď, Ť in capitals.

Long or short: a different word

byt flat **být** to be	rada advice **ráda** glad (a woman says it)	pas passport **pás** belt, strip	dal he gave **dál** further, on	mile kindly **míle** mile

Long is not loud: length and stress are separate. In dobrý, good, the ý is long, but the stress stays on the first syllable: DOB-ree. Say it longer, not louder. Most English speakers do the opposite at first.

ů: the ring is a little o

dům house **domy** houses	kůň horse **koně** horses	stůl table **stoly** tables

Why a ring? ů used to be a long o, and the ring is what's left of that o sitting on the u. Related words still show it: dům, domy. Spelling tip: ú at the start of a word (úterý, únor, February), ů in the middle or at the end (stůl, domů, home).

ě: the e that changes the letter before it

bě pě vě fě	byeh pyeh vyeh fyeh	pět · věc · oběd five · thing · lunch
mě	mnyeh	město · mě town · me
dě tě ně	soft d, t, n: dyeh tyeh nyeh	děti · tělo · něco children · body · something

Never alone: ě never starts a word. It always leans on the letter before it, and the e itself is a plain e, as in bed.

The same trick with i: soft i, hard y

di ti ni	soft: dyi tyi nyi	divadlo · ticho · nic theatre · quiet · nothing
dy ty ny	hard: plain d, t, n	dýně · ty · noviny pumpkin · you · newspaper

Borrowed words stay hard: diskotéka, titul, nikotin keep a plain d, t, n before i, the way you'd expect from English.

Ř and friends Ř, ch, c, j

Ř: a rolled r and the ž of pleasure, said at the same time. Very few languages have it, and Czech children often learn it last, so give it time. Until it comes, a plain rolled r is understood: tři, řeka.

How to practise ř

1. **Roll an r first:** a long rrr, like a purring cat. If it won't roll yet, keep practising it on its own: ř is built on it.
2. **Buzz a ž:** the s in pleasure. Hold it for a few seconds and feel where your tongue sits.
3. **Put them together:** tongue tip just behind the top teeth, say ž, then push more air until the tip starts to flutter while the buzz goes on. That's ř.
4. **Make it short:** one or two flutters are enough. ř is one sound, not r and then ž.
5. **Climb the ladder below** a few words a day, from moře to třešně.

The ř ladder: easy to hard

moře MO-rzheh sea	**řeka** RZHEH-ka river	**Dvořák** DVO-rzhaak a composer's name	**přítel** PRSHEE-tel friend
tři trshi three	**čtyři** CHTI-rzhi four	**Řím** rzheem Rome	**třešně** TRSHESH-nyeh cherries

After p, t, k and at the end: ř loses its voice and sounds more like r and š together: tři is trshi, přítel is PRSHEE-tel. Between vowels it keeps the buzz: moře is MO-rzheh.

The boss level: Tři sta třicet tři stříbrných křepelek přeletělo přes tři sta třicet tři stříbrných střech. 333 silver quails flew over 333 silver roofs. Czechs use it to test each other too.

Two easy mistakes: saying r and then ž as two sounds, and sliding into a plain ž. Dvořák is not Dvožák: keep the flutter in it.

Other letters that surprise English speakers

ch	ch in loch or Bach, from the back of the throat. Never the ch in church: that's č.	chléb · ucho · chci bread · ear · I want
h	a breathy h with the voice on, like a warm sigh. Never silent.	hrad · Praha castle · Prague
c	always ts, even at the start of a word. Never k or s.	co · cesta · ulice what · road, trip · street
j	always y. In speech the j of jsem is often dropped: sem.	jídlo · ahoj · jsem food · hi · I am
r	tapped or rolled, and always said, even at the end.	sýr · večer · Brno cheese · evening · a city
ou	one sound, oh in go.	mouka · dobrou noc flour · good night

Stress and rhythm Přízvuk

One rule, no exceptions to learn: the stress is always on the first syllable. Not on the long vowel, not on the part that looks important. Long words get a lighter beat on every second syllable after that.

First syllable, every time

Praha PRA-ha	dobrý den DOB-ree den	prosím PRO-seem	kamarád KA-ma-raad
telefon TEH-le-fon	restaurace RES-tau-ra-tseh	univerzita U-ni-ver-zi-ta	děkuji DYEH-ku-yi

Where English speakers slip: pro-SEEM, re-stau-RA-tseh, ka-ma-RAAD. Borrowed words and names follow the Czech rule too: TEH-le-fon, U-ni-ver-zi-ta.

A short word in front takes the stress

do Prahy DO-pra-hi to Prague	na stole NA-sto-leh on the table	v Praze FPRA-zeh in Prague

Said as one word: do Prahy sounds like one long word, DO-pra-hi. Even v, with no vowel at all, joins the next word: v Praze is FPRA-zeh. Small words like se, mi, je go the other way: they never take the stress and lean on the word before.

The rhythm: think of a gentle drum: a strong first beat, then even, steady beats. In a normal sentence the voice falls at the end; in a yes or no question it rises: Máš čas? Do you have time?

Syllables with no vowel

r and l can be the vowel: they carry a whole syllable on their own. English does this too: the l at the end of bottle has no vowel. Let the r or l hum for a moment: krk is one beat, krrk, not ker-ek.

vlk wolf	krk neck	prst finger	vlna wave
mlha fog	Brno Czechia's second city	čtvrtek Thursday	Plzeň Pilsen

Where you hear it: all over the map: Brno, Plzeň, the Vltava river through Prague and the Krkonoše mountains all start with a syllable that has no vowel.

Strč prst skrz krk.

Stick a finger through your neck. Four words, no vowels. Czechs love to test learners with it, and a second one: **Smrž pln skvrn zvlhl z mlh**, a spotty morel mushroom got wet from the fog.

Sounds that change Znělost

At the end of a word, b, d, ď, g, h, v, z, ž lose their voice: hrad, castle, sounds like hrat. So let, a flight, and led, ice, sound the same. The spelling keeps the d because hrady, castles, has it back.

b → p	dub oak	dup
d → t	hrad castle	hrat
ď → ť	teď now	teť
h → ch	sníh snow	sneekh
v → f	Václav a name	VAA-tslaf
z → s	obraz picture	O-bras
ž → š	muž man	mush

Inside a word, the last one decides

Two consonants side by side take the voice of the second one, across small words too.

všechno
FSHEKH-no
everything

vtip
ftip
joke

kde
gdeh
where

svatba
SVAD-ba
wedding

lehký
LEKH-kee
easy, light

s bratrem
ZBRA-trem
with a brother

One exception: v never changes the letter before it: tvůj, your, keeps its t, and svět, world, keeps its s.

Common words, respelled for English speakers

Ahoj A-hoy
hi, bye (casual)

Dobrý den DOB-ree den
hello (polite)

Děkuji DYEH-ku-yi
thank you

Prosím PRO-seem
please; you're welcome

Ano / Ne A-no / neh
yes / no

Promiňte PRO-miny-teh
excuse me, sorry

Na shledanou NA-skhleh-da-noh
goodbye (polite)

Jak se máš? YAK seh maash
how are you?

Těší mě TYEH-shee mnyeh
nice to meet you

Nerozumím NEH-ro-zu-meem
I don't understand

Dobrou noc DOB-roh nots
good night

Na zdraví! NA-zdra-vee
cheers! bless you!

Kde je...? GDEH yeh
where is...?

pivo PI-vo
beer

Česko CHES-ko
Czechia

Dvořák DVO-rzhaak
a composer's name

tři trshi
three

čtyři CHTI-rzhi
four

Two ways are fine: Děkuji is the written form; in speech most people say děkuju, DYEH-ku-yu. Na shledanou is NA-skhleh-da-noh in Bohemia; in Moravia the s is said as z, with a voiced h after it. All of these are right.

Practice Procvičování

6 · twenty lines · answers at the bottom

How: say each word out loud with the stress on the first syllable, then write the sound hint, the stressed part or the last sound on the line. Cover the bottom of the page and check when you're done.

1	Say it	čaj	2	Say it	ryba
3	Say it	kůň	4	Say it	řeka
5	Say it	chata	6	Say it	cukr
7	Say it	večer	8	Say it	děti
9	Say it	město	10	Say it	jídlo
11	Where's the stress?	restaurace	12	Where's the stress?	nádraží
13	Where's the stress?	do Prahy	14	Last sound?	hrad
15	Last sound?	muž	16	Last sound?	sníh
17	Last sound?	Václav	18	What's the difference?	byt / být
19	What's the difference?	rada / ráda	20	How many vowels?	Strč prst skrz krk

Answers

1 chai, like the tea
2 RI-ba
3 koony
4 RZHEH-ka
5 KHA-ta
6 TSU-kr
7 VEH-cher
8 DYEH-tyi
9 MNYES-to
10 YEED-lo
11 RES-tau-ra-tseh
12 NAA-dra-zhee
13 DO-pra-hi: do takes it
14 t: hrat
15 sh: mush
16 kh: sneekh
17 f: VAA-tslaf
18 flat / to be
19 advice / glad
20 none: r carries every syllable

Meet a word you don't know? In Kitsumi, hover any word in subtitles to see what it means.